



BOTTOM-LINE, CREATIVE NEGOTIATION PAYS OFF

A simple refusal to accept an 80-hour working week, and holding the line on demands for better working conditions, has paid dividends for a creative group of public service doctors at the Paarl Provincial Hospital.



Dr. Anthony Barker, founder of the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital in Nqutu at work in 1987

Suffering from burn-out, ill-health and 'all the other affects of letting ourselves be misused', the group of 4 registrars, 18 medical officers, 4 community service doctors and 6 interns (backed by their 9 consultants) decided 'enough was enough'.

The 257-bed secondary hospital has an above 90% occupancy rate, with an inpatient turnover rate of 3.5 days per patient, and handles 250 000 outpatients per year — less pressure than some hospitals, but telling nonetheless.

What sets Paarl Hospital apart is that its doctors now work a 40-hour week, with each doctor on call after hours for 16 hours per week.

Using advice from lawyer friends and the South African Medical Association (SAMA) it took a year of 'hard-ball' negotiation to secure agreement with senior management on the number of people necessary to cover hospital work after hours.

The doctor group identified the (mainly younger) physicians willing to work if paid overtime — as well as some outside doctors willing to do locums.

Chief Medical Officer at Paarl Hospital, Jacobus Louw, said the turning point was a decision to organise a collective grievance against the hospital management, 'basically saying we can't work like this anymore'.

Giving examples of how their long working hours were affecting patients, they slowly 'worked' the bureaucracy from local Medical Superintendent, Dr Breslau Kruger, to his Regional Director to the Chief Director and finally to provincial Health Chief, Dr Craig Househam.

Louw, who has worked at Paarl Hospital for 9 years and runs the accident and emergency unit, says he has great sympathy for state doctors working in rural areas.

'We're quite privileged — one of our locums recently moved to KwaZulu-Natal. When he wants to do a caesarean there, he has a sister and himself — that's it.'

He compared this to Paarl where a caesarean section team consists of a surgeon and an assisting doctor, a sister with her nurse 'runner' and an anaesthetist with his/her nurse 'runner'.

'That's the internationally accepted minimum. Our doctors should stand up to management and not allow themselves to get into these situations — they perpetuate it by allowing themselves to be used to do things that are actually illegal,' he added.

Professor Keith Bolton, chairperson of SAMA's Public Sector Committee, commended the Paarl doctors and said that most provincial health administrations managed to 'divide and rule' hospital staff by pitting seniors against juniors.

'They argue that if we divide the total number of staff with the number of hours, then we wouldn't have to work as hard as we do,' he said.

Management negotiators often told staff delegations that seniors were 'punishing' the younger doctors by not working overtime.

Bolton said the Paarl agreement was unusual because 'almost all hospital doctors I know work more than 56 hours a week'.

'Where it backfires on us, at least in academic hospitals, is that you'll find consultants not working on the floor anywhere near 56 hours a week.'

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He said that if provincial hospitals used the number of interns recommended by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) 'it would be wonderful', but most could fund only about half the HPCSA recommended intern number.

Bolton is the Chief Paediatrician at Coronation Hospital, Gauteng.

Breslau confirmed to the *SAMJ* that a collective grievance procedure was laid and that the consultants had given their input to the medical officers.

'We told the group that we could take it higher up — I realised what a serious situation it was and the strain they were taking. The thing is, in a small place like Paarl, there's nowhere to hide.' (Breslau was referring to doctors not sharing the workload.)

Breslau said he believed the message was that 'things are not that bad in the public sector — especially in the Western Cape where we're used to a good quality of service'.

Chris Bateman